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ABSTRACT

Interviews were conducted with 30 single women between ages 30-40 in an investigation of the life styles of never-married women. Two-thirds of the respondents reported that, as teenagers, they had established approximate ages for marriage; most expected to be married by age 25. Women who expect to marry see single life as temporary, and may delay making life changes that could be affected by future marriage. By age 30, two-thirds of the respondents had changed their perceptions on the likelihood of marriage. Although marriage remained a possibility, most respondents saw it as less likely than in the earlier past. Many changed their life styles as they approached age 30. A return to school was the modal form of change. Singles are often asked to account for why they have not married. The reasons they give depend on the person asking, the situation, and their satisfaction with life. Most are happy with their present life styles and anticipate adjusting to being single as they get older. A few anticipate that lack of companionship might lower future life satisfaction. (NRB)

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IDENTITIES AND LIFESTYLE ADAPTATIONS OF NEVER MARRIED WOMEN

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Sociologists generally examine the process of adult socialization, movement through status passages, by focusing on occupational, family, and deviant careers in organizations and institutions (Brim and Wheeler, 1966). As a consequence, less structured adult careers have been neglected. Marriage is a well recognized status passage marking entry into a family career. Individuals who do not marry have careers as singles which are difficult to study in the typical fashion, for entrance into a long-term singlehood career is not marked by a formal rite of passage.

The symbolic interactionist framework which emphasizes examination of personal, moral, or subjective careers (Goffman, 1961; Stebbins, 1970; Strauss, 1959) provides a useful theoretical orientations for the study of less structured adult careers. Goffman (1961:127) argues that such a career concept permits examination of "any thread of any person's course through life." Unlike career conceptualizations based on a stair-step metaphor, which suggest there are clearly defined career steps that occur in a particular sequence, the personal career concept permits recognition of all types of changes in perceptions of self and other experienced by a person.

Methodology

In-depth interviews were conducted by the author as part of a larger investigation of the lifestyles of one category of singles, never married women. An interview guide rather than a structured questionnaired was used to insure that various issues were addressed without forcing individuals to respond in predesignated ways. The data were collected in a Southern (Tennessee) SMSA to provide opportunity for comparison with other research

on never marrieds conducted primarily in the urban North.

Marriage statistics indicate that most women who ever marry do so by age 30 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1977). Therefore, to focus on entrance into long term single careers, women between ages 30-40 who had not been married and had no children were studied. In order to study adaptation patterns, the effects of recent disruptions of social arrangements should be controlled. All respondents had lived in the area for at least six months.

The population of never married women is hard to identify; thus, snowball sampling was utilized to locate never married women. The names of potential respondents were obtained through organizations which sponsor events for singles and through the researcher's acquaintances from a variety of settings. A total of 30 white women were interviewed and all contacts were virtually exhausted. In all six different interaction networks were represented in the sample. The study participants were not closely connected to one another for the most part. In four of the networks two respondents were close friends, whereas the other members were only acquaintances. Twenty-three women were involved to some extent in one of the networks.

Career Entry

Entrance into a long-term career of singlehood is difficult to ascertain for it is a non-event which is only apparent in retrospect. A person may plan to enter a work or marriage career at an approximate age and/or after completion of another career (e.g., educational). A single woman may expect to marry when she reaches a specific age (e.g., 25) or after completion of her formal education (high school or college graduation). On the other hand, people may drift into unplanned, unanticipated careers.

Decision Process

A person may be single voluntarily, i.e., have rejected offers of marriage or involuntarily, i.e., never have been asked. Singlehood may be the result of the cumulative impact of many separate decisions (e.g., the decision to not marry a specific person at a particular time, to return to school, to change jobs) or the conviction that marriage is not a desirable or suitable career.

Career decisions made at one time may limit later career decisions by preventing the individual from considering certain alternatives. However, the individual may continue to perceive that a particular career is temporary or reversible, i.e., a single woman may believe she will marry at some time.

Timetables

Some individuals may perceive their entrance into long-term singlehood careers at much earlier ages than do others. Presumably all women have at least brief careers as singles which begin when they enter the dating market. Recognition of a long-term singlehood career may occur at any time after a woman enters the dating market. It may emerge gradually or occur on a birth anniversary (e.g., when a woman passes the typical age at marriage for her social group).

Approximately 2/3 of the respondents (19) reported that in their teens they had set approximate ages for marriage. The 20-21 age range was reported most frequently (6) perhaps reflecting the median age at first marriage in Tennessee of 20. Almost all of these respondents thought they would be married no later than age 25.

One set of Rs (8) who set approximate ages of marriage for themselves did not recall that reaching those ages affected them in any or at least

in any negative ways. Yet, they reported their perceptions of the urgency of and/or importance of marriage changed.

(11) I think as I got close to 25 I realized that probably the chances were I might not be married and it became less and less important.

A small group of women (3) reported experiencing depression because they perceived marriage might be foreclosed when they reached their expected ages of marriage. But, they recovered from their depressions.

(29) I got depressed about it, and then I thought, 'Well, that's not going to do....Lord, whatever your will, will be.... I may never get married.' It's whatever he had planned for me.

Another set (8) reported that on reaching the ages of expected marriage, they set new ages. Strauss (1959) proposes that an undesired identity turning point may be postponed or avoided in this way. The desire to postpone undesired identity changes is suggested particularly by the behavior of the respondents who reached their second expected ages of marriage and again set new ones. The last ages set by respondents for marriage ranged from 25-50 with a median and mode of 30.

At the time of the interview some women had not reached their revised expected ages of marriage. Others who had passed them reported no negative consequences because usually they had other careers (e.g., educational, occupational) on which to focus.

(1) It didn't matter because by that time I'd decided to go on to graduate school.

(19) I wasn't disappointed. I think by that time I'd gotten used to the idea of knowing what freedom was--to pick and choose and do as you wanted.

One woman who was not aware of setting a new age saw in retrospect that she had a marriage and family timetable.

(2) I kind of set it aside for a while. . .until I was about 27 and. . .two things kind of happened at the same time. I felt. . . if you're going to have children and get married, how's about it? And then, I met someone that I thought might be a likely partner. . . . I lived with him for about two years. . . .Often wonder. . .if I had not met him at that particular time if that feeling would have nicely passed and I would have. . . .gotten over that feeling of panic.

For many women increasing acceptance of their lives as single women apparently led to easier dismissal of their marriage timetables. Satisfactory adjustment to involvement in a career which was not sought (long-term singlehood) may be associated with gradual recognition of positive aspects of that career.

Holding Patterns

Women who expect to marry someday perceive single life as temporary and engage in "holding patterns," repeated avoidance or delays of various actions and commitments. Some respondents maintained the life styles of people in their teens and early 20s, i.e., they postponed developing themselves as independent persons. One-fourth (8) of the respondents perceived that marriage expectations had affected how they planned other aspects of their lives. For some the "holding patterns" involved continuing to rent an apartment although they could afford to buy a house; for others it meant remaining in a job which offered limited advancement opportunities rather than seeking advanced training for better jobs. These women recognized they had delayed making changes in their

lives because marriage might affect the direction of such changes.

Most respondents did not recall delaying any plans because they thought they might marry. However, the patterns of action or non-action of nine additional women closely resembled those of the singles who were waiting to change their lives when they married. This second group of women also had delayed making major purchases and altering their work activities until age 30 or later.

The singles may or may not have perceived delaying plans or commitments because they desired to marry. However, the life changes that occured as the women approached or passed age 30 were striking. Between ages 26-31 nearly half of the respondents made some changes in their life styles, particularly in their work lives. A return to school was the modal form of work life change. For these women a turning point may have precipitated their return to school. Yet, most of them did not perceive that returning to school in their late 20s was in any way related to changes in their expectations of marriage.

Career Reversibility

Some careers are more flexible or reversible than others. For any career line, decisions made during one career phase may affect and limit decisions and opportunities in later career phases. The individual who does not follow the normative sequence of phases in a particular career line may be making decisions to postpone engaging in the prescribed behavior. However, temporary postponements may become permanent. A couple who postpone having children while attending school, building financial resources, or fulfilling desires to travel may become accustomed to their life situation and continue to postpone having children. Remaining childless

could be the consequence of a series of postponements (Veevers, 1979:44). In this way, temporary postponements may become permanent. If a woman decides not to marry a specific man, she may not be deciding to remain single for the rest of her life, but only deciding to not marry that man then. Temporary postponements may provide opportunities to reevaluate career plans and may turn into final decisions.

Thus, careers may be seen as reversible, providing options as well as programming courses of action (Glaser and Strauss, 1971). However, researchers have postulated that women who are not married by age 30 may be forced to recognize that they may never marry (Donelson, 1977). Never married women over 30 may or may not perceive that their careers as singles are reversible.

Future Expectations

Each woman reported how likely she thought marriage would be in the future. Nearly half (13) of the women believed remaining single and marrying were equally likely. Many of these respondents seemed hesitant to definitely foreclose marriage or to confidently predict marriage. Instead, they perceived the future to be uncertain.

(24) I would say the chances are very slim. . .let's say 50%. Because if I met somebody that I felt was worth marrying, I would marry.

Some of the responses reflected a discrepancy between the woman's desire to marry and the perceived probability of marriage.

(5) My desire is probably 75%. . .and then I. . .look at the availability of people. . .It lowers. . .but still not less than 50%. But, as far as desire is concerned it's still 75%.

Nine respondents perceived that marriage was very likely to be a part of

their futures. Overall, respondents did not perceive their careers as singles to be irreversible with the exception of one lesbian. The women perceived that marriage remained a possibility.

In order to further examine changing perceptions of the likelihood of marital careers, singles were asked if their perceptions of the likelihood of marriage were different in the past. As might be expected for women past the typical age at marriage, two-thirds of them (20) perceived that in the past marriage had seemed more likely. Four women reported they perceived marriage to be more likely at present than it was in the past because they believed that in the past they had foreclosed it. Current dating patterns did not account for changed perceptions of the likelihood of marriage.

Turning Points

The women who had changed their perceptions about the likelihood of marriage were questionned about the approximate time when their perceptions had changed. Although they typically identified ages between 20 and 30, half of the women changed their perceptions as they neared age 30 (ages 27-28). The timing of the perceptual changes suggests that approaching or reaching age 30 may precipitate a turning point. Also, the ages at which marriage was first anticipated.

Setting an approximate age for marriage to occur may be perceived as a self-imposed challenge, as well as a socially structured one. When the woman realizes the challenge is not likely to be met, she may experience an "identity turning point, " or revise her timetable. After reevaluating the possibility of obtaining the wife status and its associated identity, never married women approaching age 30 may reexamine their social status

and their marriage based identities.

Career Accounts

The literature on accounts has focused on explanations of recent specific actions (e.g., Why did you put a lamp shade on your head?). Singles often are expected to explain their non-action, i.e., why they have not married. The question is usually not asked in the form of "Why did you remain single last week? but rather "Why haven't you married (by this age)?"

An account may take the form of a tale, a story which explains real or perceived events. Individuals who are not satisfied with their careers may have sad tales, whereas people content with their lives may present happy tales (Goffman, 1961:150-54). A tale may include both happy and sad elements.

People have multiple identities and develop general stories (master accounts), as well as specific stories for each career (e.g., marital, occupational). A person may present different versions of standard stories depending on the audience composition. The nature of a person's relationship(s) to the other(s) to whom accounts are provided may influence whether or not the accounts are honored. Intimates are expected to support one another's accounts.

Types of Accounts

A never married woman may account for her singleness in a positive, neutral, or negative way. The person offering the account may not desire or be unable to provide the "real" explanation, but must produce a socially and personally acceptable account. Individuals often do not know why their

personal careers have evolved as they have. People account in retrospect, i.e., after they have acted, they explain their behavior. Whatever their accuracy, accounts provide insight into the identities people desire to project and the retrospective organization they are imposing on their lives.

Most of the women reported that their singles' career accounts were affected by situational factors. Sometimes they presented a joking account while at other times they provided a more serious account. Their accounts varied in accord with who asked and the nature of the situation.

(20) It depends if it's a friend. Some people I tell to mind their own business. If it was a close friend you'd answer the question.

(5) It would depend on the sincerity of their question.

Only one-fourth (8) of the women reported consistently presenting the same account although it was not necessarily what they told the interviewer was their "real" reason for not marrying. One woman told others:

(6) I'm just waiting for whatever God has in store for me, and I'm happy as I am.

However, she told the interviewer she lacked opportunities to meet suitable men.

Single women may or may not know why they are not married. Regardless, other people often ask for such an accounting. The single woman may cope with the question. Her coping mechanisms may vary with the person asking the question, the situation, as well as her current level of satisfaction as well as her current level of satisfaction with her life.

Requests for Accounts

The respondents indicated that since reaching age 30 several different types of people had asked them "Why aren't you married?" Two-thirds of the women reported that married and older people had asked. Many women identified types of people according to the nature of the relationship with these persons. Infrequent interactants (strangers or acquaintances) as well as kin were identified.

Slightly over half (56.7%) of the women indicated that it did not bother them when people requested a career account, even though a few of those respondents were irritated sometimes by such requests. Regardless of the degree of irritation respondents reported they had experienced, the reasons for irritation were the same: people are prying; people assume something is wrong; people are not sincerely interested. Only one woman, who indicated she was not confident of her own attractiveness, reported being pleased when people had asked her why she was not married.

Most of the women indicated that even though others continued to ask why they had not married, the degree of concern expressed had decreased as the respondents had grown older. Both kin and friends expressed such concern.

Future Career Satisfaction

Nearly all respondents (93.3%) indicated they were satisfied with their current life styles. However, current life satisfaction levels and anticipated satisfaction levels may vary. Thus, the women were asked to indicate the level of satisfaction they expected to experience if they were single in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. Over half (56.9%) of the women's

varied for different ages, although they did not anticipate substantial changes in satisfaction. Several women who did not expect their satisfaction to fluctuate over the years suggested that they would accept whatever the future held.

Twelve of the thirteen women who anticipated decreased satisfaction over the years thought a lack of companionship (being alone) would make them less satisfied. A few respondents (13.3%) reported they expected to be more satisfied being single when older.

Conclusions

The symbolic interactionist "career" concept was utilized to examine careers which are not marked by clear status passages, the careers of never married women. The personal career framework allow the researcher to examine specific individuals' life courses and then to develop generalizations about the types of identity turning points such individuals commonly may experience.

Two career dimensions extensively examined were entry and reversibility. A woman may perceive that she has embarked upon a singlehood career as a result of one experience or as the culmination of a number of experiences. However, societal norms apparently influence when a woman is likely to perceive that she may remain single throughout her life. By age 30, two-thirds of the respondents had changed their perceptions of the likelihood of marriage. Many of the women changed their life styles (e.g., by returning to school), as they approached age 30. These changes support the hypothesis in the literature on singles that around age 30 many never married women experience an identity turning point because they realize

the goal of marriage might not be met (Donelson, 1977; Strauss, 1959).

Nearly all of the respondents perceived their singles' careers were reversible. Even though most women perceived marriage to be less likely for them than it was in the past; marriage remained a possibility.

Remaining single in a society which emphasizes marriage means that the single individual may be treated as a deviant. Singles reported they were asked to account for why they had not married, apparently the greatest pressure to conform is placed on younger women, for the respondents reported that the frequency of requests for accounts and the level of concern exhibit over their singlehood decreased as they aged.

Societal perceptions that one is deviant may limit one's life satisfaction. For the most part respondents reported they had learned that a single life had many satisfactions. They generally anticipated that they would adjust satisfactorily to being older and single as they had adjusted in the past. For some there was a note of resignation in their responses. A few women anticipated that lack of companionship would lower their future life satisfaction, especially during their 60s.

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